

Anti-Elitism Revisited[★]

ARE ELITES AND LEADING MINORITIES A NECESSARY EVIL, A LIABILITY, or are they a vital and beneficial asset? Ultimately, the question is: should we downgrade or uplift leadership?

The list of authors who speak in favour of the latter view is impressive, both in time and in eminence. For the ancients, it is the major Greek historian, Thucydides, who reminds us that the greatness of Athens reached its height with Pericles precisely because 'by his rank, ability, and known integrity he was enabled to exercise an independent control over the multitude'.¹ After we had begun again, Bryce reviewed the most advanced experience of his time in this concise sentence: 'Perhaps no form of government needs great leaders so much as democracy does'.² Fifty years later, in 1937, after the downfall of democracy in Italy, Germany and Spain, de Madariaga wrote: 'Despite appearances, liberal democracies are dependent on leadership even more so perhaps than other, more authoritarian forms of government; for . . . their natural tendency to weaken the springs of political authority must be counterbalanced by a higher level of . . . authority on the part of their leaders'.³ During the same period Karl Mannheim had reached the same conclusion: 'The lack of leadership in the late liberal mass society can be . . . diagnosed as the result of a change for the worse in selecting the elite . . . It is this general lack of direction that gives an opportunity to groups with dictatorial ambitions'.⁴ As the second world war was approaching its end, in a classic text of the 1940s Lindsay reflected: 'If democracy is to survive it will have to employ and use every bit of skill and knowledge and leadership it can get hold of. This complicated

[★]This is a draft of part of Chap. VI (sections 3–5) from the new version of *Democratic Theory*, 2nd revised edition, Liberty Press, Indianapolis, 1978.

¹ *History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. Richard Crawley, New York, 1950, Bk. II, ch. VII, pp. 142–43.

² *The American Commonwealth*, New York, 1888, III, p. 337.

³ S. de Madariaga, *Anarchie ou Hiérarchie*, Paris, 1936, p. 56.

⁴ *Man and Society in an Age of Reconstruction*, London, rev. 1940 English ed., p. 87.

interdependent world in which we are living cannot be run without knowledge and skill, foresight and leadership. Any cult of incompetence can only lead to disaster.’⁵ The theme recurs in V. O. Key, the author who best defends the wisdom of electorates: ‘The critical element for the health of a democratic order consists in the beliefs, standards and competence of those who constitute the influentials, the opinion leaders, the political activists in the order . . . If a democracy tends toward indecision, decay, and disaster, the responsibility rests here . . .’⁶

These are all authors (and one could keep on citing endlessly) who command respect. It can hardly be doubted, I believe, that their words sincerely reflect the lessons of experience, and indeed of a long, thoughtful and often painful process of learning. Yet, if one looks into the theory of democracy in general, it can scarcely be said that the message has been incorporated in terms of theoretical status: their praise of leadership remains a sideline of little theoretical consequence. And the significant thing is that any attempt at being consequential, i.e. at developing a theoretical incorporation, is fiercely resisted and indeed disparaged – as the current attack against ‘elitism’ abundantly shows.⁷ It is high time, therefore, to confront the issue squarely.

Democracy needs both ‘realism’ (awareness of the facts) and ‘idealism’ (value pressure upon the facts).⁸ Accordingly, my question now is: how does the vertical problem of democracy fare on these tests? And the answer is straightforward: it does not fare at all.

The plain fact is that the ‘ideals’ of democracy – popular sovereignty, equality and self-government⁹ – have remained very much what they were in the fourth century BC.¹⁰ And if the ideals of democracy are still, in the main, its Greek ideals, this means that they

⁵ A. D. Lindsay, *The Modern Democratic State*, London, 1943, p. 261.

⁶ *Public Opinion and American Democracy*, New York, 1961, p. 558. Reference is made to *The Responsible Electorate*, Cambridge, Mass., 1966.

⁷ The little book that launched the label is P. Bachrach, *The Theory of Democratic Elitism: A Critique*, Boston, 1967. The literature on elites and democracy is extensive. See Suzanne Keller, *Beyond the Ruling Class*, New York, 1963; T. B. Bottomore, *Elites and Society*, London, 1964; Geraint Parry, *Political Elites*, London, 1969, which also reviews the works of F. Hunter, Dahl, N. Polsby and Presthus; A. S. McFarland, *Power and Leadership in Pluralist Systems*, Stanford, 1969.

⁸ This is, let it be remembered, the thread and recurrent theme of my book.

⁹ See G. Sartori, *Democratic Theory*, 2nd rev. ed., ch. IV, sect. 1.

¹⁰ With one major exception, the ‘valuation’ of the individual (see *ibid.*, ch. XII). But this exception has no bearing on the present argument.

refer to a direct, not a representative democracy. This is the same as saying that even today the deontology and the value pressure of democracy address only the horizontal dimension of politics. To be sure, even the Greek *polis* had magistrates and some minimal verticality. Yet the vertical dimension of an ancient town democracy compares to the vertical dimension of a nationwide representative democracy, as the tower of a village church compares to Mount Everest. Thus the plain, but nevertheless shocking, fact is that we have created a representative democracy – performing a near-miracle that Rousseau declared impossible – without ‘value support’. And not only has the vertical construction of large-scale democracy not been accompanied by a consonant ‘ideal’, but the ideals at hand can be converted overnight – as we have rediscovered in the last decade or so – into a battle cry against representative democracy. The predicament is, thus, that our polities are abandoned to the inertia of facts and, in addition, that they easily find, in our ideals, hostile ideals. At best, and saying the least, the vertical dimension of democracy remains, to this day, without ideals. And if ideals without facts are doomed, facts unpressured by ideals are ‘wicked’. We have thus come full circle.

A CRITIQUE OF THE ELITIST CRITIQUE

If the issue is posed as I have posed it, it appears that the so-called elitists have still a long way to go (at least, before really earning their label), whereas the anti-elitists have been progressively, and regressively, going a long way back. What characterizes much of the literature of the last decade or so is the pure and simple white-washing of all the enormous historical and research evidence that lies between the Greek ideals and whatever has happened and been discovered since. The real world that is brought into the picture represents an infinitesimally small slice – both historically and geographically – of the real world complexities. Worse still, the real world is always brought to court, never to the laboratory; it is cited when it elicits negation and cavalierly cancelled when it affords testing. In this sense the anti-elitist attack has paved the way for a literature that is all ideals and no facts: the supporting facts are not given because they do not exist; and facts which fail to confirm are simply erased.

Be that as it may, and resuming my thread, what is clear is that direct democracy (whether past or present) has neither the need nor the place for a ‘vertical’ value pressure. On the other hand, all the

small democracies of the direct variety are inescapably, in fact, parts of larger units and, ultimately, micro-parts of an overall unit that is always, and necessarily, an indirect democracy hinged on vertical processes. If so, should we abandon these processes, more and more, to their inertial 'natural' wickedness? Correlatively, can our future be handled, and indeed bettered, simply by revitalizing the ideals of the past, that is, ideals that are, at best, alien to the nature and problems of representative democracy? These are not, to be sure, the recommendations of the mindful and informed (as against the mindless and ignorant) anti-elitists. If pressed on these grounds, they would say that this is not their message. Yet this has been very much the net effect, regardless of intentions, of their attack. So it is here that the issue is joined. And my candid view is that in the message that has taken root in the late '60s the damage in depth largely outweighs the short-term gains. This message will not eliminate verticality; it can only drag it down. By disvaluing meritocracy, we simply obtain immeritocracy; by disvaluing selection we simply obtain disselection; by disvaluing equality in deserts we simply obtain equality in demerit. And it is strange that a literature eminently concerned with ideals should fail to perceive that these are the consequences of its idealistic stands.

I have not, as anybody can see, soft-pedalled the divergence. On the other hand, by dividing the two camps as I have divided them, we come to see that while a battle is doubtless raging, much of our fighting circles around the issue and occurs at the wrong places – where the fighting is peripheral or indeed unnecessary.

Take, for instance, the conclusion of Bachrach's attack:

If it is time to abandon the myth of the common man's allegiance to democracy, it is also time that elites in general and political scientists in particular recognize that without the common man's active support, liberty cannot be preserved over the long run. The battle for freedom will be lost by default if elites insulate themselves from the people . . . Democracy can best be assured of survival by enlisting the people's support in a continual effort to make democracy meaningful in the lives of all men.¹¹

It is weird that such a conclusion should be presented as an 'alternative approach', for none of the living authors under attack would, I believe, disagree with it.¹² Rather, and speaking in general, the point that is well taken is that an 'open' system of competitive minorities

¹¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 106.

¹² Personally I would only change (in accordance with my text, ch. II, sect. 2) the expression 'in the lives' in Bachrach's last sentence into 'in the minds'.

is not enough, that their competition can degenerate into collusion (or, I would add, into sheer demagoguery), and that the unanswered question remains, 'openness to whom for what?'. However, this criticism concurs with my point, namely, that these shortcomings have no remedy while the mechanics of the system are left to operate in a vacuum of value pressure. The question is again: how can the vertical processes of democracy perform any better than they do without a consonant deontology, and indeed when the vertical dimension is increasingly drained of value content?

There remains the central indictment, namely, that elite theory equivocates between a broad and a narrow definition of politics, and that it ends up with equating politics with elite (governmental) politics.¹³ But here the attackers equivocate far more than those under attack. Granted that we may all be at fault when attempting (and even more when not attempting) to draw the boundaries of politics, it is simply not true that Dahl, or Raymond Aron, or most of the accused, downgrade the vital importance, precisely for the *politics* of democracy, of Tocqueville's intermediary structures and voluntary groups – social pluralism for short.¹⁴ What is, instead, true is that the competitive theory of democracy is centrally addressed to the master system, to the democratic state, and that it refuses to confuse (as the anti-elitists tend to do) the overall system with its sub-systems, the macro with the micro. This is not a narrow definition of politics, but a singling out of the peculiar difficulties of the most difficult of all the problems of politics. Once more, the notions of horizontal and vertical politics¹⁵ cut across the maze and point to where

¹³ As T. B. Bottomore puts it, the 'inconsistency' of Mosca and of Aron 'consists in moving, at different stages of the argument, from the concept of a plurality of elites to the quite different concept of a multiplicity of voluntary associations' – the correct point being that the advocacy of flourishing voluntary associations 'does not lend support to elite theories' (*Elites and Society*, pp. 118–19). Not dissimilarly Bachrach's case rests, in the main, on rejecting the narrowing of democracy to a 'political method' and in enlarging 'the political scope to include the more powerful private institutions' and, more generally, generalized participation (*op. cit.*, p. 97).

¹⁴ My own stand on the point is summarized in 'Democracy', *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, New York, 1966, Vol. 4, pp. 113–15. For Aron's position see esp. 'Social Structure and Ruling Class', *British Journal of Sociology*, 1, 1950; and 'Classe Sociale, Classe Politique, Classe Dominante', *Archives Européennes de Sociologie*, 2, 1960.

¹⁵ These are the categories with which I have reconstructed the concept of politics in its variations from Aristotle to the present time (see 'What is "Politics"', *Political Theory*, I, 1973), not simply categories for the occasion.

our views truthfully differ. The distinctiveness of the competitive theory of democracy is that it confronts the vertical dimension. This is its reason for existence; and this is all the more necessary, let it be added, the more we are confronted with the anti-elitist medicine of a pure and simple 'horizontal extension'. So, we do not really differ when the argument is that political democracy needs the implementation of participation, social democracy, industrial democracy, and micro-democracies in general. In this respect the differences are of emphasis, and the emphasis relates, in turn, to how much, or how little, an author looks into the problems of applicability. The real divergence lies at this juncture: where the horizontal extension, viz. participatory democracy, is not conceived as a support for, but as the replacement of, representative democracy. However, since the mindful and informed anti-elitists do not argue that representative democracy can be dispensed with, it appears that even the controversy on who wrongly narrows or wrongly broadens politics is amenable to mutual clarification.

Having blunted the unnecessary edges, we are left with the core. And the core is, in one word, 'equality' – how we conceive and handle this concept. Putting it drastically, if equality is the central value of 'horizontal' democracy, by the same token it cannot be the central value of 'vertical' democracy. However, I will put it as follows: that if all the values of democracy are to be derived from equality, then this is the juncture at which we should least forget that equality is a *value principle* – and indeed a multi-faceted value principle of great richness. The resulting caveat is that the more this value richness is mutilated, the more democracy runs the risk of being ultimately destroyed by its own worthlessness.

Montesquieu was merely repeating the lessons of Plato and Aristotle when he wrote that 'the principle of democracy is corrupted not only when the spirit of equality is lost, but also when the spirit of extreme equality is assumed, and everyone wants to be equal to those whom he chooses to govern him'. Thus, Montesquieu added, 'Democracy must avoid two excesses: the spirit of inequality, which leads . . . to the government of one person: and the spirit of extreme equality, which leads to the despotism of one person'.¹⁶ Rousseau, although his antagonist, seemed to echo him when, in the *Discourse on Inequality*, he concluded that 'it is against the laws of nature, no matter how we define them, that an imbecile lead a wise man'. Let it be added that no matter how we define the imbecile and the

¹⁶ *L'Esprit des lois*, Bk. VIII, ch. II.

wise man, we incessantly assert 'he is not worth much' or, conversely, 'so and so is first rate'. The criteria are irrelevant to the point. Since human beings are, in fact, very different, each individual appraises 'the other' with self-tailored yardsticks, and far more often than not with subconscious and confused yardsticks. The fact remains that we do, all the time, judge and evaluate others as having superior, equal, or inferior qualities.

The concrete option is, thus, to equalize upwards or downwards (equalizing what is perceived as equal is a non-option). When it comes to this option the anti-elitists actually press, even if unwittingly, the accelerator of a levelling downward, since their case explicitly rests on valuing *only* a horizontal concept (and extension) of democracy. But is it really the case that the 'elitists' sustain in some adequate way the contrary option, the equalizing upward? I shall come to grips with this question in the final section. (Omitted in this article.) Meanwhile I should make clear that my own concept of elite differs from that of other alleged elitists.

A majority of scholars, especially of American scholars, currently abide by some variant of the Lasswell and Kaplan definition: 'The elites are those with most power in a group'.¹⁷ However, I, for one, disagree. In my perspective this kind of definition is, more than simply trivial, wrong; for it belongs to the wrong realism that drains the value content out of a value issue.¹⁸ Certainly, the intention of Lasswell and Kaplan is only to be value-neutral. But this simplistic kind of *Wertfreiheit* cannot, and never does, work out as intended. If elites, and specifically the political elites, are defined as 'the power holders of a body politic',¹⁹ we are precluded by this very definition from looking into the discrepancy between *elite qualities* (and/or standards) on the one hand, and *power positions* (unduly assimilated to elite positions) on the other hand. As a consequence, when elite research becomes an issue, we are unable to disentangle what is at issue – which is not that the powerful exist, and not only whether *power elite* is a plural, but ultimately whether the powerful represent authentic or apocryphal elites.²⁰ Thus the inevitable net implication

¹⁷ *Power and Society*, p. 201.

¹⁸ See Sartori, ch. III.

¹⁹ Lasswell and D. Lerner, *The Comparative Study of Elites*, Stanford, 1952, p. 13.

²⁰ This was actually the problem of C. Wright Mills, who contrasted the power elite with the intellectual elite and sought to render the former accountable to the latter (see *Causes of World War Three*, New York, 1958, ch. 7).

of the Lasswell type of definition is – at the theoretical level²¹ – either gratuitously to impute *elite value* to whatever power structure happens to exist, or to *devalue* whatever may be of value in such a power structure – and both things in unholy combination. From this we can arrive at the sheer sanctification of the *status quo* or, conversely, at a wholesale desecration. In the first case, the anti-elitist attack finds here its best justification; in the second, its natural ancestor. It seems to me that on both counts we miss what is really, and crucially, at stake.

Drawing the nets ashore, the observation that leading minorities exist and that they will probably continue to do so, leaves matters exactly as they are. The observation that ‘the flaw in the pluralist heaven is that the heavenly chorus sings with a strong upper-class accent’²² may appear profound but can only help the downgrading of democracy into a system of social envy. Along this route the sanctification of the existent is simply overturned into the sanctification of debunking: nothing is merit, everything is privilege. The constructive alternative is to conceive equality along the vertical dimension as an upgrading value. This is, in effect, the alternative that I shall pursue at the end. But before pursuing the question in theoretical terms, it is well to fit the abstract argument into time and place. The timely question is: where lies, today, the major risk? In elites?

The indicator that attests to the very real and encompassing drift of our societies is inflation: it has crippled the hopes for democracy in the entire Latin American continent; it is the great anxiety in a number of European countries; and the invariable pledge of every government is to reduce or at least contain it. Now, we know that the causes of inflation are numerous, complex, and also international. Yet the triggering element that is out of control is unmistakable: it lies in the excess of demand over resources, in the excess of consumption over production. Here inflation points to a political class that overpromises and then gives in.²³ The story is well docu-

²¹ This is to underline that we are not dealing here with the operational definitions that best serve the researcher. This is an entirely different problem that requires a different treatment.

²² E. E. Schattschneider, *The Semisovereign People*, New York, 1960, p. 35, quoted in Bachrach, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

²³ The proof lies in the experiment proposed by F. A. Hayek: if the government monopoly of money were to be abolished, inflation would immediately disappear (*Denationalization of Money*, Institute of Economic Affairs, London,

mented by most, if not all, European budgets: the 'popular' allocations steadily increase, while the unpopular ones – not only military expenditure but any investment without immediate rewards – shrink.²⁴ To cut a long story short, it can hardly be disputed that our governments are all, more or less, losing authority; that the time horizon of their decisions has become very short, closer and closer to taking heed only for the day; and that they are all, more or less, becoming overloaded, clogged by too many demands that they are unable to process. The overall picture is thus one of indecision – inability to take or to carry through decisions – shortsightedness and inefficiency.²⁵

Not all of this is displeasing. Actually it attests forcefully – against the contrary protests of perfectionists and populists – that representative democracy is by no means a sham. For all this confirms the extent to which the representative linkage has maximized 'responsiveness'. However responsiveness is subject, like all the rest of the family, to the rule of the opposite principle, or of the opposite danger.²⁶ Too much compliance has already landed – an increasingly frequent reality with local governments – on the shores of bankruptcy. Thus the problem and the crying need becomes 'responsibility', the other constituent element of representation.²⁷ And the more we have indulged in responsiveness, the greater the need for independent responsibility – which is what leadership is really about.

Where, then, do the present and imminent dangers lie? In the menace, within our democracies, of some kind of minority 'rule'? This reply, it seems to me, flies in the face of any sensitivity to what is really in the offing: it is a flight into another world. Likewise, the persisting and rejuvenated view that leadership is needed only to the extent that the role of the people remains secondary strikes me

1976). We may be unwilling to implement the proposal; the mental experiment, as such, remains of great value. From the people's side, Samuel Brittan compounds the problem in this formula: 'the lack of budget constraint among voters'. ('The Economic Conditions of Democracy', *British Journal of Political Science*, 1975, p. 139.) See also J. M. Buchanan, R. E. Wagner, *Democracy in Deficit*, New York, 1977.

²⁴ See R. Rose and B. Guy Peters, *Can Government Go Bankrupt? A Preliminary Inquiry into Political Overload*, forthcoming.

²⁵ See M. J. Crozier, S. P. Huntingdon, J. Watanuki, *The Crisis of Democracy: Report on the Governability of Democracies to the Trilateral Commission*, New York, 1975.

²⁶ See Sartori, ch. IV, sect. 5.

²⁷ See my article, 'Representational Systems', *International Encyclopedia of Social Sciences*, Vol. 13.

as singularly unhistorical. As the problems and their complexity grow, their solution is made to appear disarmingly simplistic: let the people handle them. The underlying vision is that the trajectory of democracy has been established once and for all; that if and when unintended events on setbacks occur, they should be ignored; and that, in essence, we should always fight the same battle of the first war. Yes, I do see all kinds of menacing minorities looming on the horizon – but for the next act. Meanwhile my fear is that our democracies may founder on the reefs of bankruptcy, overloading and ungovernability, thereby creating the conditions for the displacement of the minorities that ‘propose themselves’ by a minority that ‘imposes itself’.²⁸ I fear, then, what the anti-elitists seemingly hope, or in fact foster: that democracy may ultimately devour – as did Saturn with his sons – its own leaders. If I am proved wrong, so much the better. But where is the outrage?

THE IRON LAW OF OLIGARCHY

There still remains a fundamental objection – Michels’s ‘iron law of oligarchy’ – that questions the very possibility of democracy, thereby confronting us with the preliminary problem of how and where we should search to find it. It is true that Michels did not propound a general theory of democracy. He concentrated his attention on the political party, and the original title of his most important work, which was written in 1910, was *The Sociology of the Political Party in Modern Democracy*.²⁹ Nonetheless the conclusions that one can draw from his analysis are undoubtedly crucial to the entire problem of democracy, and this for two reasons.

The first is that a democratic system is, in actual operation, a party system. As Kelsen put it, ‘modern democracy is founded entirely on political parties; the greater the application of the democratic principle the more important the parties’.³⁰ Political parties have indeed become such an essential element that a number of authors

²⁸ This is the felicitous rendering of the antithesis between democracy and its absence by F. Burzio, *Essenza e Attualità del Liberalismo*, Turin, 1945, p. 19.

²⁹ The book appeared in German in 1911 and in Italian in 1912; since Michels was bilingual both texts may be considered original. It was translated into English in 1915, and reprinted in 1958, *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy*, Glencoe.

³⁰ *Vom Wesen und Wert der Demokratie*, ch. II. Democracy as a party system is examined extensively in my *Parties and Party Systems*, Cambridge, 1976.

perceive democracy not simply as a party system but as a 'party-cracy' (*partitocrazia*), meaning that the locus of power is actually shifted from government and parliament to party directorates.³¹ Nor is this all. The phenomenology of parties has a paradigmatic significance. For if the democratic way of life springs from the voluntary creation of small and free communities *inter pares*, parties, too, are formed as voluntary associations and are, in fact, their typical political expression in a large-scale democratic system. From this point of view, then, parties become the type of political organism that most closely resemble, or should resemble, the prototype of every authentic political democracy.

There is no doubt that Michels put his finger on a strategic point. Furthermore, and even more tellingly, he dealt with the question of organization, and there is no field of human endeavour, nowadays, that does not seek to enlarge and to perfect its organization. 'Organization' is indeed a crucial element and dimension of our lives. From all points of view, therefore, we cannot underestimate the importance of his conclusion, which is, in a nutshell, that organization destroys democracy and turns it into oligarchy: 'He who says organization, says tendency to oligarchy. . . . The machinery of organization . . . completely inverts the position of the leader in respect to the masses Wherever organization is stronger, we observe a smaller degree of applied democracy.'³²

According to Michels, this is an 'iron law', a process that can neither be averted nor stopped. It is inevitable that every party seeks the greatest possible number of members, and it is inevitable, therefore, that 'opinion parties' gradually turn into 'organization parties'. And since the power of the leader increases as the need for organization grows, all party organization tends to become oligarchical. Michels ended his classic study with the following assertion:

The existence of headship is an inherent phenomenon of all forms of social life. It is not incumbent on science to find out if it be a good or an evil However, there is great scientific as well as practical value in

³¹ See G. Maranini, *Miti e realtà della democrazia*, Milan, 1958.

³² *La sociologia del partito politico*, p. 33. For a concise summary of Michels's theses 'on the oligarchic tendencies of political organizations' see his *Studi sulla democrazia e sull'autorità*, Venice, 1933, pp. 58–9, and the following passage written in 1909: 'If there is a sociological law which political parties follow . . . this law, if reduced to its most concise formula, must sound like this: the organization is the mother of the rule of the elected over the electors' (p. 49).

establishing the fact that every system of leadership/rulership is incompatible with the most essential postulates of democracy.³³

Many criticisms can be made of Michels's diagnosis. In the first place, he speaks of oligarchy and organization without ever clearly defining these concepts. In this connection I have pointed out that Michels may well have an iron law of *bureaucracy*, but only a 'bronze law' (by no means iron-clad) of oligarchy.³⁴ In any event, the gist of this line of criticism is that since there are many different types of organization, we cannot conclude, without qualification, that all are necessarily oligarchies incompatible with democracy. In the second place, Michels's field of observation is too limited, being chiefly restricted to the German Social Democratic Party. In the third place, he is not justified in passing from the premise, 'Parties are not democratic', to the conclusion 'Democracy is not democratic'. The proof he adduces is too narrow for the breadth of his conclusion.

Notwithstanding all this, Michels's law by and large still holds, if only as a 'bronze law'.³⁵ For the first objection can be met by observing that the basic argument about organization is a generalization which, vague as it is, does touch on a persistent and persisting trend. The second objection can be answered by saying that Michels's case, the pre-1914 German Social Democratic Party, is always relevant to the large mass parties of Europe, which are hardly more democratic in origin and form. And the third objection has been handled by

³³ *La sociologia del partito politico*, p. 419. The German text reads *Führertum*, and the Italian text *sistema di capi*; therefore, to translate this simply as 'leadership' (as in the English version) fails to convey the meaning of the text. However I add 'leadership' to remind us that Michels's concept also extends, for lack of distinction, to the latter notion.

³⁴ See G. Sartori 'Democrazia, burocrazia e oligarchia nei partiti', *Rassegna italiana di sociologia*, III, 1960, pp. 119–36. Here I cite the bibliography and point to the difference between the approach of Michels and that of Max Weber.

³⁵ As authoritatively acknowledged, among others, by M. Duverger: in Michels's work 'the oligarchic tendencies of mass organizations are still described in terms of the contemporary situation' (*Les Partis politiques*, Paris, 1951); and by S. M. Lipset: 'The obvious conclusions of this analysis are that the functional requirements for democracy cannot be met most of the time in most unions' ('The Political Process in Trade Unions', in *Political Man*, p. 394). Michels is often unwittingly or indirectly confirmed. See H. Kariel: 'The voluntary organizations or associations which the early theorists of pluralism relied upon . . . have themselves become oligarchically governed hierarchies' (*The Decline of American Pluralism*, Stanford, 1961, p. 2). See also S. M. Lipset's 'Introduction' to the Collier Books ed. of Michels's book (New York, 1962); and J. Linz, 'R. Michels', *International Encyclopedia of Social Sciences*, Vol.

pointing out that if we extend the investigation to cover all the organized sectors of political activity, especially including the trade unions, we shall probably not find in the other organizations more democracy than Michels found in political parties; and, if so, the conclusion that 'democracy leads to oligarchy' stands.³⁶

It can be seen that I take Michels's argument seriously. However, I consider it to be exemplary of how we may seek democracy without ever finding it. If we agree to measure democracy by comparing its organizational forms with the prototype of voluntary associations, it will be hard to prove that Michels is mistaken. But can we proceed from a face-to-face democracy to a nationwide democratic form as if the two things were comparable and belonged to the same continuum? Michels conceives democracy *à la* Rousseau,³⁷ just as the democratic critics of our democracies do. As far as the formulation of the problem is concerned, Michels is no different from Proudhon, Marx or Bakunin. They all refer to the matrix of voluntary associations, and using this yardstick come to the conclusion that the political democracy under which we live has no organized form that corresponds to that model.

At this point, the prophecies run counter to one another. Along one path, the future belongs to democracy but its advent is postponed to the day that all the organized superstructures that repress it – above all the state – have been dismantled. Along the other path the superstructures are, if anything, destined to grow and, therefore, democracy is for ever unrealizable. In the first case we consider it possible to enlarge to infinity the prototype of voluntary associations and to convert it into that gigantic self-operating collective entity of which Marx and the anarchists dreamed. In the second case, we recognize that in the process of enlargement the prototype is distorted, and so we conclude that large-scale democracy is purely utopian. However, while the prophecies are at odds, their premise, insofar as it impinges upon the present, is the same: our so-called democracies are apocryphal.

The two camps join forces, in their practical impact, in the same negation because both Michels and the perfectionist, the pessimist and the optimist, are looking for democracy with the same lantern. And the trouble lies in the lantern. That the light of the lantern is poor

³⁶ *La sociologia del partito politico*, Preface, p. xiii.

³⁷ E.g., Michels states that the representative system is impossible, recalling the Rousseauian postulate that the exercise of the will cannot be alienated (*La sociologia del partito politico*, p. 37).

is blatantly revealed by the fact that it sheds no light on the difference between our allegedly false democracies and actual non-democracies. Neither Marx nor Michels perceives, and is less able to explain, this difference. They are unable to explain it because they never grasped how a large-scale democracy is actually produced. Their mistake lies in making a *similarity test without simile*, I mean, a similarity test applied to a non-reproducible case. They seek democracy in structures and not in interactions. They want to find it immobilized *in*, within something, instead of seeking it *between*, as a dynamic *among* groups and organizations. To be sure, structures are important. But their critical importance lies, with respect to how a macro-democracy comes about, in their interplay. If this point is missed, then we shall always land at where democracy is dead or cannot be, and never arrive at where democracy is alive and exists.

Michels sought democracy *inside* the large organization. But organization is, after all, a response to some 'bigness', to something that otherwise gets out of hand. And the bigger the organism, the more it requires definite and hierarchical structures. So, we organize in order to create not a democratic form but a body that is primarily orderly and efficient which is an entirely different thing. Hence our problem begins at the point where Michels left off. Instead of looking inside an organization, let us observe the relations, in the world of politics, between separate and competing organizations.

Why do they compete? Evidently because they seek allies from the outside, as their strength comes from the numbers that follow them. And how do they compete? Clearly, by promising benefits and advantages to their followers. The consequence is that the unorganized majority of the politically inactive becomes the arbiter in the contest among the organized minorities of the politically active. So, no matter how oligarchic the organization of each minority is when examined from within, nonetheless the result of the competition between them is democracy. More pointedly put, an all-encompassing democracy (representative democracy) *results from* the fact that the *power* of deciding between the competitors is in the hands of the *demos*.

This is what not only Michels, but the Marxists in general and part of the anti-elitists of the moment, still fail to see. The one who did see into this more clearly than anybody before him was Schumpeter. We thus arrive at the competitive theory of democracy – our next subject.

THE COMPETITIVE THEORY

For Schumpeter political democracy is, in essence, a *method* or procedure by which, through a competitive struggle for sanctioned authority, some people are chosen to lead the political community.³⁸ And if Schumpeter's definition is combined with Friedrich's 'rule of anticipated reactions',³⁹ the competitive definition of democracy can be extended as follows: democracy is the *product* of, and indeed the sequence of secondary and composite effects that result from, the adoption of that method.

This definition will be explicated and implemented as we proceed. The preliminary point is that what is being defined is *political democracy*, not processes of societal change and conflict.⁴⁰ And the important point is that our definition establishes, by actually explaining how democracies work, that large-scale democracy is not a static blow-up, or a sheer adding up, of many little democracies. Thus the analogy, or the yardstick, no longer is the small voluntary group; it is, or lies in, a system of chain reactions. And this is, I am afraid, *the* new theory of democracy, I mean, what is new in our theory. He who does not reckon with the *chain-reaction model* has either little new to say, or can only say it wrongly – without 'model perspective'.

The status of model is appropriate because the competitive theory of democracy does have the explanatory power that entitles it to this rank. On the other hand, a model never is, at least in the social sciences, a key to everything. If the claim has ever been that all of democracy resides in inter-elite competition, then our model warrants no such claim. Likewise, and more specifically, the competitive theory cannot, and in effect does not, imply that the democracy we have is the best one we can have: the model does not concern the perfectibility of democracy. Clearly the competitive theory of

³⁸ See J. A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, p. 269. Ch. XXII should be read, however, in full.

³⁹ The best formulation of this rule is in the 2nd ed. of his *Constitutional Government and Democracy*, Boston, 1941, ch. XXV. The ch. is omitted in the 1950 ed., even though the rule reappears in Friedrich's subsequent *Man and his Government*, New York, 1963.

⁴⁰ Therefore, whether a society is class based, conflictual, or integrated is immaterial. I fail to understand, in particular, why Dahrendorf's theory of social conflict (*Classes and Class Conflict in the Industrial Society*, London, 1959) should be construed as an attack upon the competitive theory of democracy. Actually Dahrendorf criticizes Mosca, Pareto and Aron (plus Talcott Parsons) for their understanding of societal structures and interactions.

democracy is not the whole of the theory. However, it endows the descriptive theory with its master key: the set of necessary and sufficient conditions for a political democracy to exist. It is correct to say, therefore, that the competitive theory defines democracy 'minimally'. The fact remains that we now own a model that explains the hitherto unexplained – and what is otherwise misunderstood.

Schumpeter presented his theory as 'another theory'. This is right – except that *another* theory is easily overworked and converted into an *alternative* theory. Indeed, the widespread view is, today, that we dispose of two alternative theories of democracy – the classic and the competitive one – between which we are free, or even required, to choose. As my foregoing remarks imply, and as I shall go on to stress, this is a misleading optics and option. The classic theory of democracy is, as it should be, a theory concerned with the foundations. Its empirical focus is, therefore, almost entirely on the individual voter and on his aggregation into majorities. Correlatively, its theoretical assumption is that a democratic polity is a polity monitored by the majority will. Now, there is nothing in this that the 'other theory' is compelled to refuse. To be sure, 'another theory' always emerges polemically: we think *against*. But when the heat and dust of battle subside, we come to see that objections are not the same as negations. So, after some thirty years the competitive theory negates only the mandate assumption, to wit, the medieval notion of representation.⁴² Much of the rest consists of objections that bear on the loose, missing and naive ends of the classic theory. For instance, when the classic theory assumes that if political power could be derived in the right way it would be, *eo ipso*, beneficent, this is plain wishful thinking. Basically, the objection is, then, that the foundations are not the complete building. This incompleteness is highlighted, in my analysis, as an excess of prescription over description. Whenever the classic theory is at a loss, it has recourse to an *ought*. At some of the crucial junctures, the ideals are either displayed in a vacuum of facts, or are disguised as facts. As a result we are left to wonder how,

⁴¹ Carole Pateman is correct in pointing out that Schumpeter is not clear-headed about the 'classical theory'; but she largely overstates her own case by asserting that 'the notion of a "classical theory of democracy" is a myth'. (*Participation and Democratic Theory*, Cambridge, 1970, p. 17.)

⁴² Actually, it is dubious whether a mandate assumption is an intrinsic element of the classic theory: being medieval, it neither belongs to the democracy of the ancients nor to that of the moderns.

on the basis of the classic theory, democracies can perform at all. Clearly, then, the classic theory falls short of the mark: it fails to grasp the part, the very crucial part, that is played by the mechanisms of the system, and precisely by the fact that its operators are compelled to compete *vis-à-vis* the consumer market. And here enters, with its additions, the competitive theory.

What is the basis, then, for the notion that we have two contrary and alternative theories of democracy? To the best of my scrutiny, this notion currently owes its plausibility to a genealogical reconstruction and to a lumping together that are largely polemical artifacts brandished by the anti-elitists. In this pedigree the competitive theory is an elitist theory and, as such, it derives from, or links with, Mosca and Pareto.⁴³ Alternatively the story is told as follows.⁴⁴ The central element of the classic theory of democracy is participation, as attested especially by Rousseau, James and John Stuart Mill, and G. D. H. Cole; whereas the features which characterize the elitist theory of democracy are suspension of participation, praise of apathy and trust in elites. However, this picture is objectionable on almost all counts. First, if participation is the keynote, then the classic theory of democracy starts with Greek democracy; and the difference that deserves reflection is that participation was not, for the Greeks, an ideal but their practice. Secondly, Rousseau represents the last revival of *pre-liberal* democracy, whereas John Stuart Mill is the major theorist of *liberal* (representative) democracy; thus, finding a continuity between the two requires heroic contorsions. Thirdly, and in particular, J. S. Mill's stance is misrepresented both historically and in substance. When Mill wrote that 'the only government which can fully satisfy all the exigencies . . . is one in which the whole people participate',⁴⁵ enfranchisement in England was still very limited, and

⁴³ Since the ulterior implication can be that Mosca and Pareto were used by Fascism, let it be stated that this is simply not true. As N. Bobbio correctly points out, 'In the two major doctrinaires and creators of the doctrine of Fascism, the philosopher Gentile and the jurist Rocco, the theory of elites had no part, not even peripheral. . . . The actual followers of the theory of the political class have not been Fascist writers, but anti-Fascist and democratic writers. . . . The only serious attempt . . . to apply and to refine Mosca's ideas . . . has been made by the demo-radical pupil of Gobetti, Guido Dorso; and the only re-elaboration of Pareto's ideas . . . has been undertaken by the demo-liberal Paretian Filippo Burzio.' (*Saggi sulla Scienza Politica in Italia*, Bari, 1969, pp. 247–8).

⁴⁴ Reference is made especially to G. Duncan, S. Lukes, 'The New Democracy', *Political Studies*, 2, 1963, and to C. Pateman, *op. cit.*

⁴⁵ This is the quotation upon which Duncan and Lukes, who consider Mill the 'central democratic theorist', build their case (*op. cit.*, p. 158).

this statement represented the fairly common way, at the time, of advocating universal suffrage. On the other hand, J. S. Mill also held, and far more centrally, that men and women must have political rights 'not in order that they may govern, but in order that they may not be misgoverned'.⁴⁶ Thus, any fair comparison over time would discover that the major difference between J. S. Mill and the current, alleged enemies of participation is that he could afford hopes that have since had to reckon with reality. Fourthly, the stand on participation and apathy of the so called elitists is very varied, and its general thrust can hardly be characterized as a state of 'suspiciousness' – if anything, the common denominator would be 'delusion'. Fifthly, the 'trusting of elites' is only, as such, the other side of the 'blaming of elites' for the failures of democracy – indeed an almost daily theme and complaint. Therefore, the distinctive aspect of the competitive theory of democracy resides in explaining under what conditions elites can be trusted and put to use for democratic purposes – and if this is not perceived – as it is not – all the rest is misperceived.

The above can be restated by noting that what is never asked or made clear by the anti-elitists is by what criterion an 'elitist' is declared to be one. If this criterion resides in the assertion that power is inevitably distributed asymmetrically and concentrated in minorities (not in majorities), then it is unclear why, e.g., Dahrendorf and C. Wright Mills should be considered anti-elitists. If the criterion resides in the intention, and precisely in whether the theory of elites is brandished to dismiss democracy and its very possibility, then Pareto, Mosca and Michels were elitists, whereas the Schumpeter-Dahl line of authors is anti-elitist, since it is characterized by the contrary intent. Is the criterion, then, participation? In this case, however, participation must be construed as a watershed: the divide is not how much participation we can have (an empirical question), but whether participatory democracy can replace, at the polity level, representative democracy. And by this yardstick Bachrach and Carole Pateman would be elitists. We are seemingly left, then, with how an author handles the 'masses' (in the elite-mass relationship). To illustrate, an elitist is supposed to see 'the chief function of the elite as holding the masses back, to restrain them from the temptations . . . of perfectionism and the pitfalls of demagoguery'; to assume that the masses are 'degenerate': that the 'purpose of election is not to enhance democracy', and that 'the corrective does not rest in educating the electorate in an attempt to inculcate higher standards conducive to the

⁴⁶ *Representative Government*, New York, 1951, p. 391.

selection of better qualified leaders'.⁴⁷ But who is such a wicked elitist?⁴⁸ Since I cannot find any, we have run out of cases.

That the genealogy of present-day 'elitists' is incorrect, and that the lumping together does not withstand scrutiny, disposes of the intellectual plausibility of the theory of the 'two theories'. What remains is its very great convenience. Indeed, as long as we are entitled to a free option, the 'new theory' (the competitive one) can be dismissed, without any further ado, with one line: I choose, between the two, the classic theory. This is, in effect, how the new populists manage to go on sailing in their easy and aptly gerrymandered waters.

As anyone can see, the issue as to whether or not we dispose of two theories of democracy that are mutually exclusive calls for a stand. And I take it that, at its present stage, the competitive theory is no more, but no less, than the completion – in its loopholes – and the correction – in its imbalances – of the classic theory. I further take it, with respect to the persistence of the contrary view, that by now the charges should be reversed: while the disparaged elitists *add* to the classic theory, the classic theory as such, i.e. displayed as a counter-theory, simply consists of ignoring the addition. But in order to buttress this conclusion, we must leave Schumpeter and arrive at Dahl's theory of 'polyarchy'.⁴⁹

Since I shall recast Dahl in my own language, the reader should be alerted to a difference in strategy. Dahl's basic strategy is to reserve the word democracy for the 'ideal system' and to use 'poly-

⁴⁷ Bachrach, *op. cit.*, pp. 40–41.

⁴⁸ Actually Bachrach attributes these views to me. The caricature and disparagement are so evident that the editor of the Italian translation of Bachrach's book writes that his misreading of my *Democratic Theory* is 'a patent case of polemic distortion' (M. Stoppino, 'Presentazione', *La Teoria dell'Elitismo Democratico*, Naples, 1974, pp. xvii–xviii.) To illustrate with a precise example, according to Bachrach I advocate proportional representation on the following grounds: 'In addition to its superiority in producing better leadership, Sartori argues that p.r. is also a superior system since . . . it invariably produces coalition governments which make it more difficult for the electorate to "pin down who is responsible".' (*Op. cit.*, p. 42.) Not only have I never advocated p.r., nor ever said that it produces better leadership (how and why should it?), but I said, and still say, the exact contrary of what Bachrach invents, namely, that since coalition governments do not enable the electorate to pin down responsibility, this is a drawback of proportional representation.

⁴⁹ Perhaps I should explain why Anthony Downs's *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, New York, 1957, has not been included in the main genealogy outlined in the preceding pages. Actually the competitive theory does draw on a central economic analogy, but it is not an 'economic theory'. I describe the importance of the Downsian analysis in *Parties and Party Systems*, ch. X, of my book.

archy' as its real world approximation.⁵⁰ I accept, instead, 'democracy' for the real world also, but divide its meaning into two halves: the prescriptive (normative) and the descriptive (denotative).⁵¹ Clearly, these are parallel ways of attacking the same problem. Yet strategies make a difference. At the outset my line of attack does not yield impressive insights. It simply points out, e.g., that democracy as 'power of the people' is conceived normatively, whereas democracy as 'polyarchy' is conceived descriptively. However, the focus is consistently set on how ideals affect the real world, and, reciprocally, on how the real world receives, but also frustrates and deceives, ideals. Along this path the focus is, then, on *ideals management*; and the finding is that, in the management of ideals, we are still in bare infancy. All is well (I hope) until I arrive at the final knot: defining democracy along the vertical dimension. Since it behoves me to do so both descriptively and normatively, it is at this juncture that my strategy gives me trouble – and leads me into trouble.

Descriptively, the 'chain reaction model' is rendered by saying that democracy is an *electoral polyarchy*. For Dahl this label is redundant, for his concept of polyarchy includes, by definition, free and competitive elections (and other properties as well). Yet, when labels succeed, they acquire a life of their own; their semantic weight largely outweighs the conceptualization of their inventor. Now, semantically, 'polyarchy' stands in contradistinction to 'oligarchy'. Therefore the term polyarchy conveys only, in and by itself, that an oligarchy is broken up, that it is transformed into a multiple, diffuse (neither coherent nor homogeneous) and, at best, open constellation of power groups. If other properties are added, these properties are extras, indeed extraneous elements, which the term as such – in its transmission from mouth to ear – inevitably drops. From this angle then, 'electoral polyarchy' is not a redundancy. This is borne out by the fact that a non-elective polyarchy is perfectly conceivable. For instance, the medieval world could be fitted into a polyarchal description but for one property: openness. However, openness is not, semantically, a necessary property or characteristic of polyarchy. Openness associates with polyarchy because we do mean, even when we do not say it, 'elective' polyarchy: it is the recurrence of elections that in fact implies openness.

⁵⁰ See *Polyarchy*, p. 9. Polyarchies are here characterized as 'relatively (but incompletely) democratized regimes'.

⁵¹ See Sartori, ch. I, sect. 1.

In any event, a political system can be polyarchal (in the semantic meaning) without being based on popular suffrage. In this case it will still be very different from an oligarchy, and even from an oligopoly, on account of its diffusion: each power unit will be left with small (in extension) or little (in intensity) power. Therefore, a non-elective polyarchy will meaningfully afford a reciprocal delimitation and control *among* leaders, at least in the sense that its dispersion defies cartelization. However, this is still a far cry from democracy. Democracies too avail themselves of a reciprocal control among leaders; but after having established first the control *of* leaders, *upon* leaders. The crux of the matter is, thus, that for the demos to restrain, control and influence leaders, the demos must have the full and unfettered power to choose them – i.e., regular elections must regularly occur. Furthermore, and equally important, it is the notion of election that establishes the association with competition and competitiveness. In and by themselves neither oligarchy nor polyarchy imply ‘competition’ at least in the sense that gives meaning to, and is meaningful for, the competitive theory of democracy. Hence, *electoral polyarchy*. To make this shorthand even shorter is, in my view, too risky.

The above is only the descriptive definition – I mean it is only the descriptive part of my defining – and also, as I have already conceded, a minimal one: it does not deal with the perfectibility, but only the feasibility of democracy. Yet, before exploring ‘maximization’ let us make sure that we do not miss how much our minimal definition already contains.

When we call democracy a polyarchy, we are not simply saying that many leaders take the place of one. If that were all the difference, there would not be much to rejoice over. Likewise, when talking of elective polyarchy, we are not saying that we are simply allowed to choose among various possible leaders. If that were all, one might again conclude, in a disillusioned vein, that the leaders change but the domination remains. However, this is not the case; and this view actually attests to the fact that we have neither grasped the chain reaction model nor, specifically, the central role played, within this model, by the *rule of anticipated reactions*. For this is indeed the rule that connects and keeps the voting act in tune with the inter-election periods. If it is true – as it is in fact true – that the leader subject to periodical electoral tests is constantly concerned with how the voters will react to his actions, it follows that he will be constantly monitored by the ‘anticipation’ of what that reaction, whether positive or

negative, might be. With the addition of Friedrich, then, the chain-reaction model becomes fully self-contained.⁵² So the abridgement 'electoral polyarchy' can now be made explicit in its entirety. The complete (descriptive) definition that I propose is:

Large-scale democracy is a procedure, and/or a mechanism, i) that generates an open polyarchy whose competition on the electoral market, ii) attributes power to the people, and iii) specifically enforces the responsiveness of the leaders to the led.

We are now ready for the next problem: the furthering in 'democratization' of democracy – and precisely its furthering beyond that amount of real (not fictitious) democracy with which the competitive machinery leaves us. The democratization of polyarchy, as Dahl would have it, occurs jointly, though not simultaneously, in two directions: i) liberalization and/or public contestation, and ii) inclusiveness and/or participation.⁵³ Let it be immediately pointed out that Dahl conceives this mapping and its categories as the 'directions' along which any and all regimes change, and are eventually transformed into one another. If the problem is narrowed – as it is here – to polyarchies, it is my reading that 'participation' fits better than 'inclusiveness',⁵⁴ and correlatively, that 'liberalization' applies better than 'contestation'.⁵⁵ However that may be, the sketch suffices to indicate the directions along which Dahl does confront, within his theory of polyarchy, the agenda of the day. And since probing would lead me far astray, let me simply retain the following points: i) that what makes democracy possible should not be mixed up with what

⁵² This point is completely missed by the anti-elitists. Their argument generally is that since the majority of the people cannot organize themselves into pressure groups, the majority remain voiceless. The fact that the majorities have voice, and often a winning one over pressure groups, precisely as electoral majorities, is consistently (and significantly) glossed over.

⁵³ See *Polyarchy*, pp. 4–8.

⁵⁴ This reading is plausible on two counts. First, it is Dahl who points out that inclusiveness alone leads to a 'closed hegemony', to wit, plebiscitarian and mobilizational regimes. Secondly, when Dahl describes specifically the 'good society' (in *After the Revolution?*, New Haven, 1970) he does envisage, in the main, the problem of participation – that will be discussed in my book in Appendix 3.

⁵⁵ Specifically, my difficulty with 'contestation' is that it does not pass the test of the principle of the opposite danger (ch. V, sect. 5 in my book). Contestation is a democratizing force as long as it vies with an oligarchy. When pressed further, Alain's remark becomes very pertinent: 'A contested power quickly becomes tyrannical,' (*Le Citoyen contre les pouvoirs*, Paris, 1926, p. 150). Thus I would say that a polyarchy is better served by 'voice' (see A. O. Hirschman, *Exit Voice and Loyalty*, Cambridge, Mass., 1970).

makes democracy more democratic; ii) that unless the two problems are treated exactly in this order the oxen may well destroy, rather than pull, the cart; and iii) that the competitive theory of democracy, once established, can and indeed does concern itself with maximizing democracy, thereby reverting also to what the classic theory preached. This last remark leads me to the final problem: defining democracy, as a system of government, *prescriptively*.